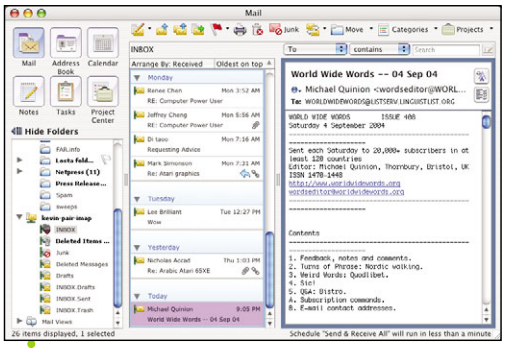
by Kevin Savetz

Office 2004 For Mac

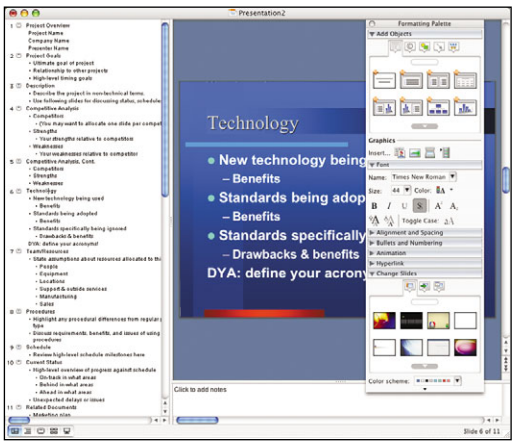


Office 2004 for Mac
$399 Standard; $239 Upgrade
Microsoft
www.microsoft.com/mac

Office 2004 for Mac was overdue for an update. The last version, released in 2001, made Office compatible with Mac OS X but didn't add significant new features. The new features in Office 2004 for Mac bring it on par with the Windows version. Others surpass features available for Windows.

The Entourage email client has numerous welcome additions that make it arguably the best email software for the Mac. The program's junk mail filter has improved tremendously. I stopped using (and didn't miss) shareware app SpamSieve to filter incoming mail. In addition, a new three-column view adds a message preview pane to the right. Microsoft says it's easier to read, but I found it ugly. You can move the preview pane to the bottom or disable it entirely.

Inbox messages are grouped by date—yesterday, last month, etc.—making it easy to see messages in your inbox that are weeks or months old. If you receive a message while in another program, Entourage quietly pops up a dialog box showing the sender and subject line, and you can delete the message without leaving the current program. Workers using a Mac in a Windows world will also like that Entourage finally supports the Exchange server.



Entourage 2004 also adds the Project Center, which lets you manage all the information related to a task and link the email, contacts, deadlines, documents, and other data associated with a project. You can share projects with colleagues, but only if they're on the same network. Access to projects is well-integrated and available from all the apps in the suite. Still, I didn't find the Project Center terribly useful; bundling the various data together can be convenient but is time-consuming.

Microsoft Word brings many changes, some the average user will have to look for. The new Notebook Layout, which resembles lined notebook paper, is intended for taking notes and making outlines. The Track Changes function, essential for collaborating in Word, is beefier, contains color-coded notes, and is finally on par with the Windows version. When pasting text into Word, the program (like the Windows version) now asks how to handle the formatting. You can keep the original formatting or match the current document formatting.

Excel also brings several notable improvements. The Page Layout view lets you see an on-screen spreadsheet exactly as it will appear on paper without messing with Print Preview. Charts and graphs also look spiffier, and you can now change colors, transparency, and labels after you generate a chart.

PowerPoint adds more than 100 new templates and 200 animations. A new Presenter view is a handy addition if you have two monitors. The presenter's screen shows notes, a preview of upcoming slides (which can be surreptitiously reorganized), and the presentation's elapsed time. On the other screen, the audience only sees the slides.

The programs were very stable and generally felt faster. Entourage pops messages on the screen in an instant now and opening a Word document is similarly sprightly. Because sharing complex files with Windows users is a perennial hassle, Office includes a compatibility report that automatically warns if there could be glitches when sharing files with Windows versions or older versions of Office.

The Standard Edition costs $399; an upgrade from any earlier version is $239. A Student and Teacher Edition is $149, and the Professional Edition ($499, $329 upgrade) adds Virtual PC to the suite. Word, Excel, and PowerPoint are also available as standalone apps ($229 each or $109 upgrades). Unfortunately, Entourage isn't available as a standalone product. A free, 30-day version is available for download.

The question of whether to upgrade is a tough one. Although Office 2004 shoehorns in a fair number of new features, many of which are actually useful, casual users can skate along just fine with the old version. If you spend a lot of time collaborating with other users, the improved Track Changes feature and compatibility report will make the new version worth the investment. Those who live and breathe Office or are jealous of the features in the Windows XP version will also be pleased with the upgrade. ▲

CPU Ranking: 0 = Absolutely Worthless 2.5 = Absolutely Average 5 = Absolutely Perfect